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Humiliating Times For a Boss Who Smokes

BYLINE: By Deirdre Fanning

BODY:

In business corridors, smoking has become the great new equalizer, at least in the minds of some chief executives who are unable to quit. Cigarettes are no longer a symbol of strength, machismo and style, and smoky rooms, no longer synonymous with serious business. Executives who smoke these days tend to feel weak, embarrassed and ashamed. Smoking makes them feel less in control. It can shake their self-confidence.

''I'm responsible for overseeing about $1 billion a year, and sometimes I think maybe the fact that I am ruled by this one little thing - cigarettes - means the wrong person is sitting in this chair,'' said one health care executive, who asked not to be named for fear of being further harassed by colleagues for his smoking. ''Sometimes I think the kid in the stockroom who doesn't smoke is brighter than I am.''

No smoker of any stripe commands social respect today. But many executive smokers are harder on themselves than on others in their organizations who smoke. By virtue of their education and professional stature, they believe they should know better than to sign their own death warrants. And the fact that they don't can leave a deep seam of humiliation for subordinates to mine.

''My employees make jokes about my smoking habit,'' the health care executive said. ''And that hurts. I've had some very uncomfortable days at work because I can't stop smoking, and I've had about as much of that as I can handle.''

Indeed, with the country increasingly divided into smoking and no-smoking zones - in restaurants, airplanes and office buildings - one might expect the executive battle line to be drawn between those who smoke and those who don't. But the struggle ''is really within the smokers themselves,'' said Robert Rosner, executive director of the Seattle-based Smoking Policy Institute, which helps companies set up no-smoking policies. ''These executives are control people. As smokers, they feel out of control.''

That is why some executives go to extraordinary lengths to avoid being discovered. And even those who are out of the closet don't want their colleagues to know the level of their dependence. ''I'm Mr. Clean until you smell my breath,'' said the health care industry executive, who says he often pops breath mints to disguise the problem.

Other executives refrain from smoking at any meeting where nonsmokers may be in attendance. ''Generally, if you feel you have to ask permission, you don't

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smoke,'' said John F. Kirby, a senior vice president at the Continental Corporation who is one of the only remaining smokers among senior managers at the insurance company. ''I have gone out of my way to avoid controversy.'' The stress of the job, of course, makes quitting cigarettes a tough assignment. Ask Steven Smith, another top executive at Continental, who tried to quit for years. A smoker for 20 years, Mr. Smith would kick the habit every weekend only to resume it on Monday. ''I'd come back into work every Monday morning and see how long it took me to start again,'' said the executive vice president. ''Usually it was around 10 A.M., but I think twice I made it until Tuesday.''

He finally managed to quit three years ago. (And none too soon, as the insurer goes smoke-free on July 1.) ''Smoking made me feel inferior, less worthy, weak in some way,'' he recalled.

But perhaps the hardest personal struggle comes for those executive smokers who, for whatever reason, institute companywide no-smoking policies and are supposed to obey and enforce rules that they dread themselves. Since 1984, Paul O'Brien, the president and chief executive of New England Telephone and Telegraph, has been steadily tightening the restrictions on smoking at the office. And last week, the company announced that on July 1, smoking would be completely banned at all offices. What of his own pack-a-day habit? ''Well, I haven't quite made up my mind about quitting,'' he admitted. ''But I realize that as president, the one overriding thing you can do is to give a sense of example. I am prepared for some difficult times ahead with this.''

New England Telephone vice president of human resources, Peter Bertschmann, another smoker, is less sanguine. ''We haven't quite figured out how to handle it,'' he said. ''I know there'll be bad days when cigarettes are very important and I don't see myself going down 17 flights to smoke outside. We just ended a long strike with some of our workers and I can tell you, there was some pretty heavy smoking going on around these offices during those months.''

Some executives even complain that no-smoking policies cause their productivity to fall by adding to their tension levels. ''Smoking relaxes me,'' said Paul Russell, a senior vice president at National Medical Enterprises Inc. in Santa Monica, Calif.

Even tobacco companies, the stalwart upholders of smokers' rights, have stumbled in the changing tide. According to the best-selling ''Barbarians at the Gate,'' when George Roberts, a partner at Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Company, entered a meeting in 1988 at the headquarters of RJR-Nabisco to discuss the buyout firm's proposed purchase of the company, he immediately became irritated by the cigar and cigarette smoke hanging heavy in the conference-room air. Waving away the fumes, he asked Peter Cohen, then the chief executive of Shearson Lehman Hutton Inc., which had submitted a competing offer, to extinguish his cigar. Eyebrows were raised. Had Mr. Roberts forgotten he was trying to take over a cigarette manufacturer? Surely not. Kohlberg is the new owner.

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